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HUMAN CAPITAL OR TOXIC ASSET

ECONOFICTION CLASS, CLASS POLITICS, DERIVATIVES, FINANCIALISATION, HUMAN CAPITAL, NEGATION

This is a sequence of reflections on affirmation and negation, on identification and severance: determinate negation as strategic affirmation, the identification of concrete universals and severance from a defunct relation. These lines will be explored with reference to the current situation of the waged and unwaged working class, most proximately in Britain, as “debt” becomes the ideological white noise and the practical horizon of all social and political imagination. Household indebtedness is confused with the state deficit in the spontaneous ideology of the Conservative austerity agenda, as what remains of the crisis-riddled economy is sacrificed to the “debt” – as poor people to loan sharks, so Britain to the bond investors. The nationalist narrative of “we’re all in this together” eliminates any space for discussion as to who might bear greater responsibility for the crisis, and who should be paying for it. The announced cuts make it all too clear – it’s the bloated public sector and welfare payments which are responsible, and those that have the least shall have even that taken away, as the Biblical parable goes. Yet a fatalistic consensus prevails for now, transfixed by a menace beyond dispute: the “debt.”

Debt has taken on an unprecedented social centrality, almost eclipsing the labour theory of value as both the principle of capital accumulation and the principle behind the structural role of labour in social relations organized through the value-form. The social logic of speculation is also at work [sic] in the premise of human and social capital which, as Jason Read argues, has reformulated every human activity as an investment in a future of potential access to greater social wealth. The notion of “human capital” also serves to eradicate any antagonism between those who own the means of production and those who only have their labour to sell, since both are understood to be investors seeking to maximize a return, which is only natural.¹

Debt has of course also been the prime driver of accumulation for the past couple of decades, from deficit spending in the public sector contingent on a finance boom driven by the opulent trade in CDOs (Collateralized Debt Obligations) and other fancifully quantified risk instruments, to the characteristic business of financialization – profiting from the hugely expanded consumption of credit products that its own effect of suppressing wages had created a demand for. In debt-financed accumulation, value was no longer at issue, but wealth; and as workers did not produce wealth, but were a liability on the balance sheet, the only way they could reimburse the wealth creators, the entrepreneurs, was by going into heavily commodified debt. And consumer debt, it need hardly be added, was the force that inflated the asset values that crashed so impressively two years ago, along with the demand it was able to sustain. It is in this scenario that we must look at what the shift from worker to debtor as the definitive social identity

for most people today augurs for political re-composition in a time when unemployment and welfare cuts will leave them with marginal resources to either pay debts or meet more immediate needs. And, as has been plentifully evident around the world, austerity budgets trigger counter-attacks on the terrain of reproduction at once, as in Greece and Spain. This is because “social spending” is the first reduction demanded by the agencies of fiscal discipline, and public services become the stakes of survival when low-paid or nonexistent jobs become the norm, a condition exacerbated by cuts. In times of crisis, when the ratio of waged to unwaged starts to tilt negatively, reproduction becomes the political battleground, if only through sheer force of numbers of people who can’t get access to a wage, as well as the important category of the “working poor” who have to rely on benefits. The very existence of the “working poor” is the clearest demonstration, if required, that it is capital and not the indebted worker who is the parasite on the state, as the state allows employers to pay minuscule wages which it then agrees to supplement. The feasibility of targeting social services with the moralistic rhetoric of personal responsibility – like the received idea of a “dependency culture” – relies absolutely on a common sense which blacks out the systemic forces which are genuinely dependent, if not addicted to, the existence of a super-exploited, unemployed, illegalized and desperate “workforce.” It has to ignore the structural necessity of a low-waged and unwaged reserve army which enables capital (including state and semi-private entities) to suppress wages, since the state ultimately meets the costs of reproduction in fear of worse consequences. It is in this sense that all “welfare,” regardless of its levels of generosity or parsimony, regardless of whom it identifies as “deserving” or “scrounging,” is corporate welfare, since its function is ameliorative to the operations of the market, rather than redistributive. Needless to say, “welfare reform,” like austerity, fails on its own economic terms. The factors of decreasing demand and the cost of policing welfare by outsourcing it to for-profit organizations that have an incentive to cut the welfare rolls ends up being far more expensive than the portion of state expenditure welfare comprised in the first place. But if private contractors are happy, and the tabloids are appeased, than markets are surely working overtime in the public interest.

No matter how obvious these contradictions seem to be, and how long they’ve been around, it is worth pointing out time and time again that the fight we have on our hands is not one against market rationality, to be countered with a more “social” set of principles for the economy. There is no rationality, only the looting and cannibalism which set the terms of capitalist accumulation for now. As the likes of David Harvey have exhaustively shown in their work, but which is no less obvious from reading the newspapers, “economic rationality” is a red herring for authoritarian managerial regimes of state power. Neoliberalism is a state project, with state-financed programs of engineering competitiveness across the entirety of social life. Because it is first and last an ideological project, objective circumstances or results have very little standing in it. Thus there’s no relevance to exposing its murderous or hypocritical inequities; it can only be drained of legitimacy ideologically. The argument is easier to make, paradoxically, because the objective conditions themselves have been shaped by the ideology to the point where, as some propose, “the class relationship” is coming to an end and communism is for the first time possible without a prior, “programmatic” affirmation of the working class. Work is no longer available objectively nor desirable subjectively as a political identity, although this lack of content does not prevent the ruling class from continuing to wield it as a disciplinary cudgel.² Although these ideas have been around since at least the 1970s, with the “Zerowork” strain of post-autonomist thinking, and all the variations of the “refusal of work” stance on the communist and anarchist ultra-left, their re-emergence now comes into the very different political landscape of three decades of neoliberal reaction, globalized capitalism and the destruction of organized labour, not to mention the de-industrialization of Europe, North and South America, the Middle East and Africa and the vast low-grade industrialization of parts of Asia and China. The “communist idea” now has to take into account that the refusal of work is not a political choice, but a prerogative exercised by a stage of capitalism that has much less need of surplus-value production since the discovery that debt is far more profitable.

In the vision of “austerity,” everyone is potentially a parasite on the nation’s solvent body, looking to compound the nation’s interest rate in the global markets. So why not behave like one? What is the outcome of a process, underway for at least two decades in the UK, whereby the majority of the population is positioned as the actual or virtual waste of the system? What could be the (anti-)political subjectivity of human capital turned toxic asset? When finance is universally agreed to be the source of all value, the machine of accumulation is rent, not productive investment. The generation of wealth boils down to trade in the “fictitious capital,” along with rent-seeking and capitalization/enclosure of existing [public] assets. As the only way workers can contribute to that valorization is through debt, debt stands as the point of de-legitimation of the current logic of capital. A refusal of debt must take the place of refusal of work in a situation when work is being refused by capital anyway.

Having said that, it is very ambiguous for now to what extent, if at all, such political implications have been drawn by the campaign groups, unions and grassroots party activists on the British left. It seems difficult to detect a real consideration of debt going on, besides the generic “we won’t pay for your crisis” standpoint; there is no disputing that someone does have to pay, and this by and large consists of making an economic case for one sector at the (implicit) expense of another. Nowhere is the stunted outlook of the mainstream British socialist left more conspicuous than in the “Right to Work” and “Green Jobs” campaigns that have been appearing on its fringes since the “crisis” hit. They seem to be missing something central about how capital operates nowadays (not to mention the simultaneously reactionary and idealist perspective of demanding “good jobs”): wealth is no longer created through productive investment, and workers don’t want jobs, they just want money. Why else would all the most visible instances of workplace militancy in the past couple of years, from factory occupations to “bossnappings” and threats to blow factories up, all center around better remuneration packages for job losses rather than the maintenance of jobs? Neither capital nor labour are interested in jobs: all anyone is interested in these days are assets. Capital has neither the inclination nor the resources to offer workers more exploitation right now, but there has to be recognition that exploitation remains the bedrock of

the social contract, and it is achieved most efficiently without jobs in an economy premised on the capitalization of debt. Isn't the "jobless recovery" appearing as the watchword in economic analysis today built on assumptions that consumption (or "consumer confidence") can single-handedly drive a return to prosperity, that is, through another credit bubble? It is immaterial that the global economic crisis was triggered by the bursting of a systemic credit bubble; credit bubbles are the only conceivable avenue of a return to normality, much as disastrous neoliberal policies are only intensified in the aftermath of their resounding failure.

It seems evident, from this perspective, that we can only produce wealth (not value) for capital now through our debt repayments. In that case, shouldn't debt be the pre-eminent focus of resistance and revolt, rather than petitioning imaginary benefactors for imaginary jobs? Further, it needs to be restated time and again that any demand for jobs dovetails all too harmoniously with the government propaganda against the "workshy" who will be forced off welfare if they don't come to the independent realization that "work sets you free," as the current Work and Pensions secretary has been quoted as saying. This no doubt inadvertent refrain of the National Socialist slogan throws light on the "obscene" agenda of the "we're all in it together" mantra providing the rather flimsy legitimization of the announced cuts. On this point at least, there is no departure from earlier historical periods where worsening economic conditions were used to build up a nationalist consensus that paved the way for fascism.

If workers are now "human capital," then the moment of negation of the social relations that have brought us here can start with affirmation: the affirmation of the sick and deteriorating nature of capital from the side of its "human" variant (what was once known as "variable capital"). As "human capital" is being maximized in or out of work, the terrain of reproduction (social services, health, housing) seems like the most direct arena in which this capital can become collectively dysfunctional, also a necessity in the era of intensified biopolitical surveillance and risk management which social services represent for "dependent" populations in the UK.³ The docility of the service "user," isolated, managed and humiliated in the absence of an employment allowing her to exist without recourse to state benefits, is what needs to be questioned by the users, as well as by the service workers, at the point of "delivery" and in solidarity. It must be recognized that social benefits are actually a "social wage," and consist not of charity from the state, but of the value extracted from formerly and currently employed workers, as well as that funnelled from them in taxes and VAT. The position of supplication has to be transformed into a position of "insolence," of justified and collective appropriation. After all, if there are no more workers, then surely oughtn't "human capital" assert its own series of claims, as capital has asserted its claims for the past 40 years to the exclusion of all others?

The dialectic between affirmation and negation needs some clarification. Any practical critique entails both moments, though not a linearity or progressive vector between them. In any social movement, there needs to be an identification of a position (of exclusion, of injustice) in the contradiction, before the place of exclusion is negated by re-organizing the terms of justice or inclusion themselves on another basis. We can see this in the feminist and queer movements, where the structural role of the "woman" or "homosexual" must be accurately identified within the relations of capitalist patriarchy before gender and heteronormativity can be overturned. The same thing with the "classical" class struggle: the social affirmation of workers as a discrete class with interests incompatible with those of bosses and the organization this engenders is a precondition for the political imperative to negate wage-labour and capital. Mobilization around the "wrong" (Rancière) precedes, and persists through, the elimination of the conditions that produce that "wrong," the conditions which orient the definitions of justice and at the same time, exclude certain kinds of people from making claims via those definitions (like the exclusion of women and many others from the scope of the French Revolution's "Rights of Man" – which did not prevent the "Rights of Man" being seized by women, by Haitian slaves, as the programme of their fights for liberation.) Using another set of terms, we can look at the "void" or the "point of inconsistency" of the situation (Badiou) as that which is invisible from its point of view, but which is nonetheless primary for it; a moving contradiction. For Marx, it is the co-existence of perfect equality in the sale and exchange of labour power in capitalism with exploitation in production. This is glossed by the Malgré Tout Collective thus:

*"Structural injustice does not reflect a failure or a partial dysfunction of capitalism: on the one hand, it is perfectly consistent and it leaves no room for reproach; on the other hand, this injustice is what establishes or makes capitalism possible, it is its point of inconsistency, necessarily invisible to capitalism itself. Thus the free, just and rational rules of the market, the laws of supply and demand, have their origin in an injustice, an alienation and an absurdity that are unintelligible to the system, and which are, consequently, perfectly legal and consensual even in the eyes of a large number of workers and trade unionists. This is why the point is not so much that injustice sparks up rebellion, but rather that rebellion forces the inconsistency of the system: it's in light of the revolutionary political project that the system reveals itself as unjust."*⁴

It may be that political action that is used to expose this point of inconsistency and to practically refute its terms may not even be recognizable as political action, because it is proposing a new set of identifications – not only of what constitutes injustice or a "wrong," but of what it means to act politically, and the divisions it introduces are not the familiar ones, since it is no longer seeking to adjust concrete phenomena to an ideal structure, but to question the structure as such, and the subjectivities produced in it, which are at once singular and universal:

"[the] position is not 'negotiable,' or cannot be answered from the normality of the situation, because it implies its destruction. In this way, political action ceases to be a partial claim, so as to become a singularity: something unforeseeable by the situation because it questions its very foundations. At this point it's no longer a matter of a class, but of an unclassifiable or anomalous political subject. This subject does not exist outside the situation. It's a subject that arises from, but is not linked to, the situation because the situation does not foresee it. At the same time, this singularity is universal from the very moment it introduces a

rupture that concerns all the inhabitants of the situation (bourgeois, petit-bourgeois, intellectuals, artists, proletarians, etc.), who now have to decide whether or not to commit to the struggle that questions not only the situation they inhabit, but also what they in themselves are.”⁵

This subtractive moment (strikes, refusals to be monitored, refusals to enter into “workfare” programs, sharing information and resources between claimants rather than between claimants and the state, or even mass and organized “benefit fraud”) can become a constitutive moment in reclaiming the social legitimacy which seems to be the exclusive property of markets for now, provided it can move from a dismissible, “partial” activity to a “universal” one which re-organizes the majority perception of general interest – a perception that is more often than not, more often unconsciously than overtly, on the side of the markets rather than other people (or, rather, refuses the distinction between them). When the legitimacy of the state is grounded in its responsibility to markets – as the true generators of wealth – rather than to the public, who are deemed to just consume this wealth, it has to be workers who break down this apparent reality through their new primary role as indebted consumers, or sources of unproductive wealth accumulation, at the same time as through their role as unproductive workers,⁶ waged or unwaged, commodity-producing or relationship-managing.

An itinerary of the politics of reproduction, leading up to a more precise exposition of what shape the “politics of debt” could assume, is the goal of this text. First, we will revisit the history of the politics of reproduction through the Welfare Rights Movement, Italian Autonomist feminism, the Wages for Housework campaign and “self-reduction” in 1970s Italy, the Claimants’ Unions of the 1980s and the Unemployed Workers unions and initiatives in present-day Britain. In Part Two [included below], we will explore the thesis that the claim of unproductive labour to unproductive capital must be asserted as part of the decomposition of the wage-labour-capital relation discussed by the “communisation” current (Theorie Communiste and Endnotes), which entails the impossibility of asserting a work-based political identity (“only revindictive struggles”), either subjectively (no-one identifies with their jobs) or objectively (workers’ power is broken by law and by globalized re-structuring) and which, as we have already seen, needs to be asserted through the point of inconsistency of the situation – for the politics of debt, we can provisionally name it as “uncapitalized life,” just as “free human activity” came to name human praxis beyond wage labour when wage labour was decisive, both to relations of production and struggles for emancipation. The class relation Marx describes below may be in its historical eclipse:

“Capitalist production, therefore, under its aspect of a continuous connected process, of a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation; on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer.” (Capital, vol. 1)

But the class relation between creditor and debtor flourishes in that vacuum, so long as capitalism in its core lineaments is still with us and so long as most of the populace has to survive within its laws and mediate this survival through the value-form. Again, Marx ensures it doesn’t escape us that, “When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction.” (p. 711) To the historical (and still current) figures of the housewife and the benefits claimant, we add the figure of the debtor, and try to trace a politics of debt on the ground of the politics of reproduction. What happens to the concept of the “social wage” after the wage?

REPRODUCTION IN THE HOME, REPRODUCTION OF THE HOME

To move chronologically, and to take a starting point which in some ways will appear arbitrary – certainly to historians of the working-class, community and women’s movements – the Welfare Rights Movement coming onto the scene in the 1960s in the United States stands as an interesting case, as it shared activists, demands and campaign tactics with the Civil Rights Movement and the second-wave feminist movement, as well as the more radical community-based and nationalist-influenced factions of the movement like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords.⁷ The Welfare Rights Movement was composed of the single mothers who were the main constituency of U.S. social services of the time. They were among the first, both in the Civil Rights and the women’s liberation movements, to position their struggle squarely on the terrain of social reproduction. They grounded what came to be known as “the personal is political” in the systemic inequities that organized their lives. They were also the first to name and analyze the structural contradiction that drove their demands on the state – the contribution of unpaid domestic labour to the efficiency of the capitalist economy – and were the first to associate their reproductive function with an economic position. They suggested that this reproductive labour be recognized and valued in the same way as paid labour in the workplace, and also turned this into a political practice, claiming a voice and a subject position from the sidelines of marginality and impoverishment: as women, as single mothers, as African-American in many cases, and as social welfare claimants. They claimed a “social wage” as against the patriarchal “family wage” paid to the male worker as the head of the family, the social responsibility of capital for the “externalities” of commodified but unwaged social being – looking after children and the elderly, for example. Dignity and autonomy from harassment, surveillance and corrupt bureaucracy were also emblematic to their struggle. As traced earlier in the dialectic of affirmation and negation, the Welfare Rights Movement affirmed a “wrong” in order to negate the social conditions and the social identifications – patriarchy, capitalism and racism – that made that wrong possible, indeed unquestionable, and rendered them its natural targets. Yet it can be argued that overall, like the mainstream of the Civil Rights and women’s movements (which came a bit later), the ultimate horizon of the movement for most of its members, in praxis and analysis, was that of improving their position within the current state of affairs rather than seriously challenging it, which would have had its tactical as well as its political reasons. The institutionalization of the movement in the National Welfare Rights

Organization (1966–1972) lent it negotiating power at a higher level, but the reactionary social climate of the Nixon era, as well as internal splits (over expanding the movement to include the working poor vs. redefining welfare as a feminist issue) ended up destroying the organization. U.S. Government counter-insurgency activities no doubt also played a role, given the overlap of welfare rights activists with Black Panthers and other radical (as well as moderate – the CIA drew no such distinctions amongst its internally colonized) community action groups.

In the early 1970s, the currents of Marxist feminism in Italy associated with the Worker's Power and Autonomia analyses started to put forward the idea that reproduction also constituted a "hidden abode," as Marx spoke of production in its contrast with the sunlit equality of exchange. They proposed that since unpaid work conducted primarily by women in the home produces, the same as factory workers, the commodity of labour-power, which is then sold on the market for a wage, that they could as well form the "vanguard" of working-class organization and work refusal. Until that point, women at home were (indirectly) producing surplus value.

The desired consequences of this redefinition of women's work was that unwaged workers would be acknowledged as subjects of working-class politics, and that "women's issues" could be more broadly addressed as "class issues" and understood as antagonistic to capitalist interests in the same way as the issues of waged workers. Another reason was to actualize reproduction – childcare, health care, prostitution, power relations in the home and community – as a properly political site of contestation, rather than continuing to abide by the "revolutionary logic that established hierarchies of revolutionary subjects patterned on the hierarchies of the capitalist organization of work."⁸ Finally, some elements of this position, though not all, came to the conclusion that if housework produced a commodity, maybe even value, i.e., it fulfilled the minimal conditions of capitalist work in general, then it should be paid for by capital like any other work "directly," "at its value," rather than through the miserly margins of welfare payments or the "family wage."

Alongside the number of conceptual, political and practical problems addressed by this analysis, there were a similar number of problems with the analysis itself. On the conceptual side, it could be claimed that no labour in capitalism is ever paid for "at its value," or else surplus-value extraction would not be the first law of capitalist work. The second objection would follow from this, that for Marx, "being a productive worker is a misfortune," and that the identification of domestic labour with productive work only made it politically meaningful in the "workerist" context, fixated as it was by the productive/unproductive labour distinction and which saw the factory worker as hegemonic, rather than providing a weapon against the relations of production in its own right. On the political side, as was swiftly pointed out, linking the emancipation of female houseworkers to the wage both reinforced the centrality of the state or "total social capital" to the reproduction of workers and families, and trapped women in the home rather than renegotiating gender roles and radically moving the structure of the family in a more collective and egalitarian direction. Additionally, it faced the paradox of the "transitional demand" that asks to reform capitalist relations in a way which would make them no longer capitalist; a paradox equally confronting the idea of the "basic income" today. Finally, the practical problem of evaluating housework in the same terms as waged work would revolve around problems of measure and withdrawal of labour:

"[...] how exactly a wage could be calculated, given the lack of instruments for the measurement of the work day? How could housework 'strike' overcome the necessary aspects of community support for struggle in other sectors of the class composition?"⁹

Wages for Housework could further be discussed as a tension between the prescriptive and descriptive: how does a critical position on the production of value help us overcome value? Proceeding through the moments of affirmation and negation again, the affirmation would go something like: we, too, produce value and are productive workers, so the workers' movement has to take us into account and expand their concept of value to include unpaid or "social" labour. The negation could then be, if we produce value, then value is so broad as to fall apart; it immediately becomes a political rather than a technical category. This was in fact the position of Silvia Federici, among others, who cautions against the literal interpretation of the Wages for Housework programme, placing emphasis rather on its strategic horizons and its critical character, what she terms "Wages against Housework." Rather than the productivist agenda of raising all to the same baseline of exploitation, the contribution of the Italian Autonomist feminist perspective was to push for a generalization of the refusal of work by expanding the category of what constituted work, and to ensure that the "hidden realm" of reproduction would never again be forgotten in the analysis of and action against capitalist exploitation. As Federici has recently noted on the legacy of Wages for Housework for today's anti-systemic movements:

"When we said that housework is actually work for capital, that although it is unpaid work it contributes to the accumulation of capital, we established something extremely important about the nature of capitalism as a system of production. We established that capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor, that it is not built exclusively or primarily on contractual relations; that the wage relation hides the unpaid, slave-like nature of so much of the work upon which capital accumulation is premised [...] In other words, by recognizing that what we call 'reproductive labor' is a terrain of accumulation and therefore a terrain of exploitation, we were able to also see reproduction as a terrain of struggle [...]"¹⁰

Parenthetically, it should also be added that Italian Marxist feminism took on very disparate forms, although the one chronicled above has perhaps become the most renowned due to the originality and far-reaching impact of its analysis. There were also feminist elements of the armed factions that emerged in Italy towards the end of the 1970s, and their efforts did not transpire in

the “hidden realm” alone – they targeted health clinics that refused to provide abortions to users of public healthcare for “reasons of conscience,” but were happy to do so for a steep fee, as well as sweatshops employing mainly young and immigrant women.¹¹ The emphasis on reproduction as a political battlefield most consistently developed by the feminists could also be seen to be key to the prevalence of both organized and informal campaigns of “self-reduction” and “proletarian shopping” in 1970s Italy; groups of tenants would take unilateral and concerted action to lower their rent or utilities, or pay lower prices or nothing for public transport or for groceries (although clearly the workers in these sectors had to be co-operative to some extent for these tactics to succeed).

The “social factory” of waged, unwaged and informal work did become increasingly central to Autonomist Marxism, as activists “followed the workers out of the factories,” who were leaving for reasons ranging from and between the broadly subjective (mass refusal) and broadly objective (mass unemployment). At the same time, there continued to be a caesura between feminism and class struggle, with divisions between socialist feminists, separatists, bourgeois and social democratic feminists and so forth complicating a situation where the subordination of women seemed so clearly to be attendant on capitalist class relations (and on religious customs) but seemed to flourish equally well in Left milieus among “comrades.” An articulation of the relations between patriarchy and capitalism (as well as the construction and exploitation of race)¹² where sexism and racism are seen as both divisions in a global working-class and as relatively autonomous, as phenomena which are both overdetermined and contingent, continues to be one of the most vexed fault lines in Marxian praxis; a thinking-through of the relations between them which is adequate to the present moment of capitalist decomposition, in all its unevenness, is a project of staggering complexity and no less staggering urgency, even with the resources supplied by thirty or more years of Marxist and materialist feminism and queer theory, not to mention historical and actual praxis.

However, the prescient appropriation by the Italian Autonomist feminists of the reproductive field for political action by its “native informants,” by those already defined by their lack of access to social visibility and economic power, can now be used to contextualize the organized struggles against welfare cutbacks that found a resurgence in Thatcher-era Britain and are making a gradual reappearance today. Reproduction as the social mediation of the value-form outside the workplace has clearly always been problematic, as the foregoing has illustrated. Yet it is in times when this particular mediation starts to eclipse the encounter with the value-form in the workplace for increasing numbers of people, i.e., in times of mass unemployment and capitalist restructuring, that the politicization of reproduction starts to have more general repercussions which are no longer limited to those temporarily falling into the category of the unwaged and who decide to organize for mutual aid and advice. From examination of the 1980s groups, the practical consequences of this can be quite disparate. The interstitial and low-level nature of some claimants’ groups can suddenly acquire a degree of visibility for which in some cases the participants are not prepared, or materially cannot sustain. In some cases also, the organization can shuttle between being a campaign group with radical demands and a “service provider,” and can finally end up subcontracted as a service provider for the state – something which is only going to escalate with the present UK government’s ideological commitment to expanding the role of the voluntary sector in what were formerly areas of state provision: ‘The Big Society’.

Such a dialectic between self-activity and support has so far not been able to translate into a broader mobilization which finds a commonality between the interests of the unemployed and the still-employed, even in the current destructive climate of the impending and gratuitous cuts. It has, in other words, not been able to redefine those sociological or factual categories as political ones. Yet such a commonality, in whatever terms it is set out, and whether it’s guided more by expediency than left communist analysis, is indispensable to the de-legitimation of the cuts and a defeat of the political project that is generating them.

The Islington Action Group of the Unwaged (1980–86) along with other claimants’ action groups and benefit workers’ strikes of the 1980s and 1990s, and going into the present with the national and local branches of the Unemployed Workers Union, the Brighton Unemployed Centre, the Edinburgh Claimants Union and the London and Edinburgh CAPs (Coalitions Against Poverty), the Hackney Solidarity Group, Save Our Council Housing and Save Our Nurseries, comprise the most visible historical and present-day actors of the struggle on the terrain of reproduction in the UK. To different degrees, the perspective is about encouraging resistance and collective activity among the ever-more demonized “benefits scroungers” who are uniquely aware of the effects of the state deficit being resolved on their backs but only have the means to confront them in a largely individualized and piecemeal fashion, i.e., from a situation of defeat. It is also sometimes about the principled “refusal of work” position, viewing benefits as a direct appropriation of socially produced wealth otherwise removed from its producers; and then, fundamentally, it is about occupying the “welfare state commons” and all the contradictions of that position. Like the struggles in the universities or the battles against social housing privatization, it is less about upholding the entrenched model of public services than it is about refusing to concede what little remains of non-commodified public goods (although that struggle would seem to be lost in terms of higher education in England, where fees up to £10,000 for a full degree and rocketing student debt is now the norm; universities are still free in Scotland). This reactive, rear-guard orientation, though it might seem to be less descriptive of the 1980s – which had a more recent memory of working-class organization – than of the contemporary groups, confirms that the situation of defeat is fundamental to all the listed formations. Although the political conjuncture demands generalization of struggles, three decades of working-class decomposition, union-hostile laws and public quiescence are preventing this from happening at the moment. But this is not to overdetermine the future, even the immediate future. And couldn’t decomposition find its own specific power? Could we say that the labour of the negative still applies even when it is a question of the negation of

labour?

Note: Originally conceived in two instalments, the material referred to but not extensively discussed in this text will appear in an autonomous text for Reartikulacija in 2011.

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META

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